

- * Aileen Hernandez
- * Black Women Organized for Action
- * by phone, 14 September 1997

[Discussion of Maida Springer, labor organizer because she was an organizer for Ladies Garment Workers Union, as was Hernandez.]

K: Well, I've narrowed it down to four main questions and then a couple of follow up questions so it shouldn't take very long.

A: Good, because I looked at some of these and I thought, "These are good questions, but I don't know if I have the answers to them."

K: Some of them I've been able to discern from the materials you sent, so thanks for that. Let's see. I wanted to ask you if you recall any particular arguments or discussions or events in BWOA that you thought were pivotal. Either ideological disputes or, I don't know, things that you thought helped define who the organization was.

A: We really didn't have very many ideological disputes and part of that was because of the way in which we were structured. The way we were structured we gave whoever happened to be the coordinators for that quarterly period, full authority to do what they wanted. We had some very distinctly different approaches when we had coordinators 'cause some of the coordinators were very heavily involved in the Black Power movement at that point in time. Some of them were very much involved in Democratic Party. We almost never had an ideological difference because we had agreed that one of the things we wanted to do was link African American women from whatever perspective they were in and when people sort of said, "Well, that's crazy because some people will do wild things." We said, "Well, how much trouble can you make in three months?" What we said essentially was, "Get the ideas out there. We don't run from any idea." It certainly made a difference, in some cases as to who was participating in a particular event, but it was never an ideological difference in terms of how the organization functioned.

K: So did you find that some of the same members stayed active no matter who was in charge?

A: Yeah, yeah, some of us were there all the way through because we were philosophically committed to bridging all of the different points of view in the African American community, so we were involved in everything that went on.

A: I was looking through some of the news releases that we had had at various times. For example, we had one which was—I don't know if you have ever run across this idea, because you're probably very young and you were not alive when this occurred—but it was a point in time when there was a "Zebra Killer" in the Bay Area and it was a Black man that they felt was this killer. So the mayor of the city set up this dragnet and started stopping all Black people who were driving around in the community—any black man in their car was stopped because they were trying to find the Zebra Killer. So we all got out there and had a big press conference arguing about what a ridiculous thing this was, what a violation of civil liberties it was. You saw the story about our involvement with Elayne Jones?

K: Right and I was wondering how—well, first I had a question about the Zebra Killer. Was that—I have an article about that but I wasn't sure if that was a metaphor for something else or if there were actual animals—[laughter]

A: [laughter] No, no animals. It was because it was a Black/white situation. Most of the people getting killed were white and the person that they said was the killer was black. So they started with this colorful exploitation of the Zebra Killer. It was ridiculous.

K: Was that a press manufactured thing?

A: It was press. Yeah, it was press manufactured.

K: Okay, I didn't want to make any assumptions.

[break in tape]

K: With Elayne Jones do you remember how that was resolved?

A: Yeah, she did not get the particular job with the symphony. They did fire her as part---I think I might have sent you the news release in which that occurred, but she did continue to be a tympanist. She still is a tympanist with the ballet company in San Francisco. I think she's just about to retire actually.

K: So she did not end up getting a tenured position?

A: She did not get that one, no. She did not get that although we all participated. We demonstrated and picketed. We had one of the best dressed picket lines that the city had ever seen.

K: Okay. What were some of the sources of contributions that BWOA received? I know you had dues.

A: Yeah, that was primarily it. We didn't---we were never organized as a 501(c)3. So we were not organized to receive non---contributions that would be tax-deductible. We remained active---one of the points was that we wanted to stay in the area of activity so that we could endorse candidates, which we did. We did a lot of political stuff. So all of our money came through either fundraising events, which we periodically had, but not very many and dues. We didn't have a whole lot of expenses. We didn't do very fabulous---fabulously expensive things.

K: What do you think that the BWOA accomplished?

A: I was looking through the papers and I'm amazed at how much we have accomplished. It was really incredible. We not only, of course, kept the organization very much active, we elected people to office. When I first came to San Francisco, the Board of Supervisors in San Francisco was eleven white men and one white woman and we helped to elect the first black woman who got elected to that office. And that was Ella Hill Hutch. We have since that time elected a whole lot of others. We were in coalition with other women's organizations so that by 1980 we six women on the Board of Supervisors, two of whom were Black.

We also created a publishing company. We published two books. The publishing company was called Sapphire Publishing Company and we published two books out of that.

K: What kinds of books were they?

A: One of them was called *The Seventy Soul Secrets of Sapphire*, which was a kind of cartoon book. I have a few copies left. I might send you that one. You would enjoy. It's probably still very topical. And the other one was an educational book---it's got a terrible title---it's a post-secondary education book, *Towards a Viable Education for the Black Community*, but it's not elementary school, it's post-secondary.

As I said, we did a lot of politics. We were in coalitions with a lot of people so that we did things on that level. We had a major conference in 1982 called "Black Women Stirring the Waters," which drew over 500 Black women to a conference at that point and time. We helped to define Black women's point of view on freedom of---reproductive rights because we held a conference in which we---well, we not only held a conference. We had a retreat in which we discussed all of the things that were related to Black women's involvement in the whole sexual revolution. One of our colleagues did a survey of Black women and out of that survey it became very clear that Black women, in spite of what some Black men were saying at that point, were fully supportive of the right to choose. So we got involved in that. And part of that went on, of course, to become the Black Women's Health Project across the country [Is she making a direct correlation between BWOA and NBWHP? Were there certain people who went on to help form it or does she mean

that BWOA for people talking about these issue and, in that way, helped in the evolution of NBWHP?]. So those things began to be part of it.

As I said, we did a lot on getting women nominated to positions. We had a whole campaign for providing women's names, mostly Black women's names, but we also worked in coalition with other groups. So sometimes we did that jointly [provided names to whom?]. We set up some coalition organizations, one of which was the Third world organization, which was a coalition of women of color groups. And then we were always very much involved in the National Organization for Women. Several of our people held top positions in NOW in those periods of time.

K: Did that come out of your own involvement with NOW as President?

A: A lot of that had to do with that, but my colleagues---I run a consulting business in San Francisco---and one of my colleagues, my business partner was the head of one of the tasks force coordinating groups of NOW. Another one was a regional director for the Western Region of NOW. She, incidentally, she's now passed away, but she was also the head of the California delegation to the Houston conference in 1977. Do you need her name?

K: Was that Patsy Fulcher?

A: Patsy Fulcher. And let's see, what else did we do? Oh, we had a big boycott against General Mills, which worked at one point and time. We did a lot of things. In fact, I was talking to this morning to someone who was one of our early members and I've been getting a lot of people every time I run into somebody from Black Women Organized for Action who says, "Why don't we have a reunion?" So we're going to do it. Next week I'm going to send out a letter to everybody and see if we can have a 1998 reunion 'cause next year is the 150th anniversary of the women's historical---well, it's actually the first women's rights conference, which was held in Seneca Falls, is next year. So we're going to move for doing it in September of 1998 and maybe doing a whole weekend and asking people to come to San Francisco and tell us what you've been doing.

K: Oh, great. Well, please let me know if you do that. I mean, I hope to be done with the dissertation by then, but I would still like to keep---

A: Yeah, I will let you know because it should be great fun, if we actually get it together. It should be very, great fun. A lot of our women have gone on to do great things.

K: So, okay, I have one of your last newsletters, which was in 1980.

A: Yeah, that is THE last newsletter I think you have. I sent it to you purposely. We sort of stopped having newsletters and stopped having regular meetings after Ronald Reagan got elected to the presidency.

K: But then you had a conference in '82, so how did that work?

A: We did not close down the organization. In fact, it's still not closed down. I periodically send off letters on the stationery of Black Women Organized for Action.

decline?

K: Right. And you signed on to the Contract with Women [NYT ad in 199 ?].

A: Right. Yes. So we continue to be involved because some of our members are still around. We haven't gone out of business, but we just don't hold meetings that all.

end of mtgs.

K: So it's more informal?

A: It's much more informal at this stage. I think people got "meeting'd out". There were so many things. One of the positive things that happened with Black Women Organized for Action is that many of our women got involved in lots and lots and lots of things. So that they're still out there doing work and they do

it in the name of BWOA whenever that's convenient, but they also do it on their own behalf. So I think what we've done is we've spread the leadership, which was our purpose. One of the reasons we structured it the way we did was that we did not want it identified as anybody's organization. So that it would be in my name and everyone would say, "Oh, that's Alieen's group." We didn't want that to happen. We wanted us to really create new leadership and we did that. I think we have significantly done that. There are so many Black Women Organized for Action members who are into many, many things, not only here in California, but around the world [like whom? names/positions or work].

Spread out
leadership

K: So when---there was a letter in one of the newsletters by Patricia Walton and she was talking about returning to some of the BWOA's official procedures---

A: Yeah, I saw that in your note, but I don't remember what that was about. Do you remember what the article said?

K: Let's see. I have it right here. She's talking about, I guess, there was a problem with---some people wanted the organization, BWOA, to join other organizations as a group and she was saying how that wasn't really a part of the group's mission. But then she goes on to talk about---she lays out some procedures that the group might have had when you first started about the structure of the steering committee, about current members being allowed to vote---

A: Oh, yeah. There was always a struggle over who should be able to vote in BWOA. We always erred on the side of letting everybody vote.

anti-
bureaucrat-
ization

K: It's really about decision-making and who should be allowed to make decisions.

A: One of the, I think, one of the reasons the organization began to decide that they didn't need to have all these meetings any longer was to have those kinds of arguments about who should vote and who should not vote and whether the organization was going to be taken over by groups because they would come and vote even if they hadn't paid their dues and all the rest of that---and I think none of us ever wanted that to happen.

K: Right. So you didn't want it to deteriorate into those sorts of things that other groups---

A: No. We didn't spend twenty minutes on by-laws because we were organized for action and we figured if we were going to sit down and write real long by-laws about who could do what and when, we would be actually negating the purpose of the organization was to let leadership rise from wherever it came.



K: Okay, do you know the current whereabouts of other members?

A: Oh, yes. I can send you a list if you want because like I said, we're going to do the reunion and I've been putting, at least my list in order, most of which should be pretty good addresses at this point because when Patsy died we sent out notices to a number of people so that they would know it. And we did the same thing when Ellie died in '82. So we've got current addresses. And I'd be glad to send you the list. And they're all over the country. In fact, there may be some right around there somewhere in Atlanta.

K: Okay, that would be excellent. Well, those are all the questions I have, so if you think of anything and you want to give me a call collect---

A: Good. Oh, the Feminist Credit Union---you asked about the members. Well, that was Patsy 'cause Patsy was on that board and so I was looking to see if I had any of her files on that and I didn't, but I happened to be talking to another friend today and I mentioned it. One of the organizations that I know was a part of it was the Daughters of Bilitis, which was one of the early gay women's groups and they were part of it because this friend that I was talking to was one of the founders of the Daughters of Bilitis. So she remembered that the Daughters of Bilitis was on it and then another member of BWOA---I can see the people's faces, but I can't remember their names, which is a problem for those of us who are seventy now.

So she's going to try to come up with some names. If I do find any of that information, I'll send it to you. There were seven or eight organizations that were in the coalition that put together the credit union.

K: Okay, great.

A: And I don't remember all of the news and things that I sent you, but if I come up with one that looks kind of interesting, I'll just make a copy and send that as well.

K: Okay. That would be excellent.

[end]